RESEARCH-BACKED THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

AI and the Next Five Years

Why Routine Technology Jobs Will Shrink - and Hands-On AI Operators Could Earn Far More

A 2026-2031 forecast for IT, technology services, and digital marketing

Suresh Das

IT and Digital Marketing Expert | 25 Years of Experience

Call Generation | Keyword Ranking | Website Enhancement | Performance Optimization

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sureshdas.com | blackhatseocourse.com

My central prediction: During the next five years, some IT, technology-service, and digital-marketing teams may operate with up to 50% fewer people because AI will absorb routine production and coordination. But the professionals who remain will not merely be "AI users." They will be hands-on, cross-functional operators who understand systems, revenue, risk, and customer outcomes. The best of them could create several times more value and, in selected roles or business models, earn up to five times more.

The argument is not "AI will take every job"

Artificial intelligence is changing work faster than any software shift I have seen in my 25 years across IT and digital marketing. The first internet era digitized information. Cloud computing digitized infrastructure. Mobile digitized access. Generative AI now digitizes parts of thinking, production, analysis, and coordination. That is why this transition will touch not only repetitive clerical work but also coding, design, research, marketing, support, and management.

My forecast is deliberately strong: in selected technology and digital functions, half of today's positions could disappear, be combined, or be redesigned by 2031. This does **not** mean that 50% of all global employment will vanish. Jobs are bundles of tasks, and AI will usually automate some tasks before it eliminates an entire occupation. The deeper change will be organizational compression: work once

divided among a content writer, SEO executive, analyst, junior developer, server administrator, and project coordinator may be orchestrated by two or three capable operators using AI.

Current evidence shows why a large disruption scenario cannot be dismissed. The World Economic Forum estimates that structural labour-market change will affect 22% of formal jobs by 2030, creating 170 million roles while displacing 92 million. It also reports that 41% of employers plan to reduce workforce where AI automates tasks, even as 77% plan to upskill employees. The IMF estimates that AI may affect about 40% of employment worldwide and 60% in advanced economies. The ILO's 2025 index finds that one in four workers is in an occupation with some generative-AI exposure, although transformation is more likely than complete replacement.

These figures do not validate a universal 50% job-loss claim. They do validate the central warning: exposure is broad, employers are planning head-count reductions, and job descriptions will change faster than many workers expect.

AI reduces tasks first, then management layers and team size

Companies do not normally remove a job because a chatbot can answer one question. They remove or consolidate roles after technology can complete enough of a workflow with acceptable cost, speed, and quality. That process has four stages.

First, AI assists a person with drafting, coding, summarizing, design, research, and troubleshooting. Second, the worker delegates complete tasks to an AI system and reviews the output. Third, multiple

tasks are connected into an automated workflow using agents, APIs, business rules, and company data. Finally, management notices that the same output can be produced by a smaller team, and the organization redesigns roles around the remaining human bottlenecks.

This is already visible in real usage. Anthropic's early Economic Index found AI use across at least one-quarter of tasks in roughly 36% of occupations, while only about 4% of occupations showed use across three-quarters of their tasks. The pattern was more augmentation than automation, 57% versus 43%. The important message is that partial automation spreads widely before total job automation becomes common.

The result will be fewer narrow jobs and more broad roles. A company may no longer need one person only to prepare reports, another only to produce basic pages, and another only to check routine errors. It will need an operator who can define the objective, give the AI relevant context, connect tools, inspect the result, correct errors, and accept responsibility for the business outcome.

A two-track labour market is emerging

The next five years will not simply divide workers into "technical" and "non-technical." The more useful division will be between work that AI **democratizes** and work that AI **professionalizes**.

When AI democratizes a task, it enables a non-specialist to produce an acceptable first result. Basic copy, simple graphics, standard reports, routine code, generic keyword lists, and first-line support answers become cheaper and more abundant. More supply pushes down the price of undifferentiated work. People whose only value is producing the first draft will face intense competition.

When AI professionalizes a role, it raises the level of judgment expected from the human. The worker must handle exceptions, ambiguous goals, security, architecture, regulation, customer trust, prioritization, and trade-offs. PwC's 2026 AI Jobs Barometer describes exactly this two-track market. It reports that jobs professionalized by AI are growing twice as fast as jobs democratized by AI, with 42% faster wage growth since 2021. The skills required in the most AI-exposed jobs are changing more than twice as fast as in the least exposed jobs. AI-exposed junior roles are also seven times more likely to demand traditionally senior skills such as leadership and strategic thinking.

Type of work	Likely AI effect by 2031	Where the human premium remains
Routine production	Strong compression of basic text, code, designs, reports, and support replies	Defining the brief, brand truth, final quality, and accountability
Analysis and optimization	AI performs rapid diagnosis, pattern finding, forecasting, and testing	Selecting reliable data, interpreting causality, and choosing trade-offs
Technical integration	Fewer hours for standard configuration and troubleshooting	Architecture, security, legacy systems, failure recovery, and change control
Revenue and relationships	Automation of research, outreach preparation, and follow-up	Trust, negotiation, persuasion, industry insight, and owning the commercial result

This explains why the middle of the market is under pressure. Generic production becomes inexpensive, while high-accountability work becomes more valuable. The safest career strategy is therefore not to compete with AI on volume. It is to use AI to increase volume while differentiating yourself through judgment, integration, verification, and results.

The valuable professional will be an AI-enabled all-rounder

Many people describe "prompt engineering" as the new skill. Prompting matters, but it is not enough. A person cannot reliably command AI to do work that he or she does not understand well enough to specify, test, and approve. A fluent prompt without domain knowledge can create a confident mistake faster.

The valuable all-rounder has a T-shaped profile. The horizontal line represents working knowledge across business, data, infrastructure, security, user experience, and communication. The vertical line represents deep expertise in at least one commercial or technical domain. AI then becomes the operator's leverage layer.

For example, a hands-on professional can ask ChatGPT or another capable AI system to review a requirement, propose a plan, generate a script, write configuration, create test cases, explain an error log, draft content, build schema, analyze performance data, and prepare a client report. The same person can move from diagnosis to implementation without waiting for five specialists to exchange tickets. What previously required 10-12 hours of fragmented work may sometimes be compressed into one focused working cycle.

But the operator must know when the answer is wrong. AI models still have a jagged capability frontier: they can perform extremely difficult tasks and then fail on something that appears simple. Stanford's 2026 AI Index notes that agents reached about 66% success on a benchmark of real computer tasks, meaning they still failed roughly one-third of attempts. A randomized METR study also found that early-2025 AI tools made a small group of experienced open-source developers 19% slower on complex, familiar codebases, partly because review and correction consumed time. These findings do not show that AI is useless. They show that real productivity depends on task selection, context, tool design, verification, and the operator's skill.

The future belongs to people who can combine delegation with inspection. They will treat AI output as a fast junior colleague's work: useful, scalable, and never exempt from review.

Digital marketing is becoming technical revenue engineering

Digital marketing provides a clear example of this transformation. A traditional SEO executive could once specialize in keywords, content briefs, backlinks, or reports. That narrow scope is becoming insufficient. Search is now distributed across Google results, AI answers, assistants, maps, marketplaces, video, social platforms, and brand mentions. At the same time, website performance, structured data, crawlability, trust, and conversion have become inseparable from visibility.

An AI-era AEO, SEO, and GEO professional should understand much more than content. The required stack includes server behavior, DNS, CDN caching, security headers, redirects, logs, crawl budgets, canonicalization, sitemaps, rendering, Core Web Vitals, schema, entity relationships, APIs, analytics, conversion tracking, and search systems such as Elasticsearch. The professional does not need to be the world's best engineer in every layer. However, he or she must understand the connections well enough to diagnose the real constraint and direct AI or specialists safely.

Consider a website that receives traffic but produces too few calls. A narrow marketer may publish more articles. A hands-on AI operator begins with the business result: qualified calls. The operator can use AI to accelerate an end-to-end process:

- Inspect analytics, Search Console data, call tracking, crawl reports, and server logs to locate losses in impressions, rankings, clicks, speed, or conversion.
- Review DNS, CDN, caching, compression, image delivery, redirects, robots rules, sitemaps, canonicals, status codes, JavaScript rendering, and mobile performance.
- Cluster queries by intent and entity, map them to pages, find content gaps, and design answer-ready sections for AEO and generative search visibility.

- Generate draft schema, metadata, content briefs, test scripts, dashboard queries, internal-link recommendations, and implementation tickets.
- Improve landing-page clarity, trust signals, call placement, forms, offers, page speed, and attribution; then run controlled tests against calls and revenue rather than rankings alone.
- Verify every change in staging, monitor logs and performance after deployment, and reverse changes that create security, indexing, or conversion problems.

AI can perform a large share of the analysis and first production pass. The human supplies access, objectives, commercial context, technical judgment, permissions, and final approval. This is why "SEO executive" may shrink as a standalone production role while "organic growth engineer," "AI search strategist," or "revenue optimization lead" commands a premium.

My own career focus illustrates this shift. Call generation, keyword ranking, website enhancement, and performance optimization are no longer separate services. They form one revenue system. A page that ranks but does not convert is incomplete. A fast site with the wrong search intent is incomplete. An AI-generated answer with no source credibility is incomplete. The winner is the professional who connects infrastructure, visibility, user experience, and revenue.

Can the remaining professionals really earn five times more?

Fivefold salary growth should be treated as an upside scenario, not an automatic promise. The strongest large-scale evidence today is substantial but lower. PwC's 2026 analysis reports an average 62% wage premium for workers with AI skills. It also finds productivity growth 40% higher at the most AI-exposed companies than at the least exposed, with a "superstar" effect among the leading firms. These results support wage polarization, but they do not show that the average employee's salary will become five times larger within five years.

However, fivefold **earning power** is possible under specific conditions. Compensation can rise much faster than a normal salary when a person changes the unit of value. A worker paid for hours may receive a moderate raise. An operator paid for outcomes, scarce expertise, consulting, intellectual property, team leverage, or revenue contribution can capture a larger portion of the value created.

Imagine that a specialist previously completed one technical audit per week. With reusable AI workflows, automation, and deep review skills, the same person may complete several audits, implement fixes, produce client-ready evidence, and connect improvements to calls or sales. If the operator also reduces the need for coordination across multiple roles, the economic contribution may

multiply. The person can then negotiate a larger salary, lead a broader function, serve more clients, or build a productized service.

Five conditions must exist for a fivefold outcome:

1. The professional produces a measurable business result, such as revenue, qualified calls, cost savings, uptime, risk reduction, or faster delivery.
2. The person owns an end-to-end workflow instead of one easily replaceable task.
3. AI output is embedded in repeatable systems, templates, tests, and automation rather than one-off chatting.
4. Quality and risk remain controlled as volume increases.
5. The compensation model rewards value creation, not only attendance or years of experience.

Without these conditions, AI may simply increase workload without increasing pay. Workers should therefore document before-and-after performance: hours saved, errors prevented, pages improved, incidents resolved, conversion uplift, calls generated, revenue influenced, and customer retention. Evidence turns AI skill into negotiating power.

The people at greatest risk are those who stop learning

The vulnerable employee is not necessarily the oldest, the least educated, or the least technical. It is the person whose work is predictable and whose skill set remains frozen. Early labour-market evidence already suggests pressure at the bottom of some professional ladders. A Stanford Digital Economy Lab study using payroll data found a 16% relative employment decline among workers aged 22-25 in the most AI-exposed occupations, while employment for more experienced workers in the same occupations remained stable or grew. This is an early U.S. finding, not a universal law, but it shows how AI can remove the junior tasks through which people traditionally gain experience.

Experience alone is not protection either. Twenty-five years of knowledge becomes valuable only when it is converted into current execution. A senior professional who refuses AI may be slower than an adaptive mid-career worker. A beginner who relies blindly on AI may produce untrustworthy work. The strongest combination is experience plus continuous hands-on learning.

The OECD reports that fewer than 1% of workers are likely to need advanced AI-development skills, while far more will need digital fluency and the ability to use, analyze, and interpret data. Problem-solving, creativity, innovation, management, and communication remain essential. This is good news: survival does not require everyone to become a machine-learning scientist. It requires people to become competent operators in their own domain.

My five-year forecast: 2026 to 2031

2026-2027: Copilots become standard. AI assistance will be built into browsers, office suites, code editors, CRMs, analytics, design tools, support platforms, and search systems. Companies will expect employees to use it, but many deployments will remain pilots. McKinsey's 2025 survey found 88% of respondents reporting AI use in at least one business function, yet nearly two-thirds had not started enterprise-wide scaling. The immediate advantage will go to workers who create reliable personal workflows and can prove their results.

2027-2028: Agents absorb connected routine workflows. AI will move from answering questions to executing multi-step work across approved tools. Service-desk triage, reporting, content operations, testing, campaign setup, lead research, documentation, and basic maintenance will increasingly run with human supervision. Entry-level hiring will tighten in exposed functions because organizations will need fewer people for first drafts and routine coordination.

2028-2029: Companies redesign roles and flatten teams. Once agentic workflows are stable, employers will stop measuring AI as a separate project. They will redesign processes around it. Some middle-management and coordination layers will shrink. Cross-functional leads who can own a metric from problem to result will become more valuable than narrow task supervisors.

2029-2030: Verification, trust, and proprietary context become the moat. Generic production will be abundant. Advantage will come from company data, customer relationships, domain expertise, workflow integration, security, governance, and the ability to verify outputs. Search and marketing will reward credible entities, original experience, useful tools, trusted communities, and evidence of real outcomes rather than mass-generated pages.

2030-2031: Work shifts from job descriptions toward outcome portfolios. More professionals will combine employment, consulting, automation assets, and specialized services. Companies will buy smaller expert teams with AI leverage. The market will reward people who can show a portfolio of solved problems, not merely a list of software tools.

A survival plan for professionals and employers

Every IT, technology, and digital-marketing professional should build a six-part capability stack now.

1. **Deep domain expertise:** Know the customer, process, failure modes, economics, and quality standard of your field.
2. **AI orchestration:** Break an objective into tasks, provide context and constraints, connect tools, and manage multi-step execution.

3. **Technical literacy:** Understand data, APIs, servers, cloud, CDN, security, logs, analytics, automation, and testing at the level required by your role.
4. **Verification:** Check facts, code, permissions, performance, bias, security, compliance, and business impact before release.
5. **Human influence:** Strengthen judgment, communication, leadership, negotiation, empathy, and the ability to gain trust.
6. **Commercial measurement:** Connect work to calls, sales, savings, speed, quality, risk, retention, or another outcome that management values.

Employers also have responsibilities. They should map tasks before cutting roles, redesign workflows instead of buying disconnected tools, protect company and customer data, define when human approval is mandatory, and create apprenticeship paths so junior employees can still learn. They should share productivity gains through training, progression, and compensation. Organizations that use AI only for head-count reduction may save money briefly but lose the knowledge needed to handle exceptions, innovation, and trust.

The research already shows both outcomes. A large NBER field study of customer-support agents found a 14% average productivity increase from generative-AI assistance, with larger gains for less experienced workers. Yet other studies show slower performance when experts must review weak output in complex environments. The lesson is simple: buying AI is not transformation. Workflow design, training, context, and measurement determine the return.

Conclusion: AI will not replace capability - it will expose the lack of it

The next five years will be difficult for people and companies that treat AI as a temporary tool or a shortcut to low-quality volume. Routine production will become cheaper. Narrow job descriptions will be combined. Entry-level paths will be disrupted. Some teams may operate with half the current head count.

At the same time, opportunity will expand for professionals who are hands-on, multidisciplinary, commercially aware, and accountable. These people will use AI to think faster, test more, coordinate systems, and deliver complete outcomes. Their value will not come from typing clever prompts. It will come from knowing what to ask, what context to provide, what result is acceptable, how to implement it safely, and how to prove that it improved the business.

My forecast is therefore not that half the workforce wins and half loses automatically. The real divide will be between professionals who keep performing isolated tasks and professionals who learn to command an intelligent production system. A fivefold salary will be rare. Fivefold leverage will be increasingly possible. Those who convert that leverage into trusted, measurable results will lead the AI economy.

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